

Delivery alert until NaN

Judge denies release for suspects in compound case

By Ryan Boetel / Journal Staff Writer

Published: Wednesday, September 12th, 2018 at 6:31pm
Updated: Thursday, September 13th, 2018 at 12:19am



A ramshackle compound in the desert area of Amalia is seen Aug. 10 (Brian Skoloff/Associated Press)

Copyright © 2018 Albuquerque Journal

A federal magistrate judge in Albuquerque on Wednesday ordered that all five adults arrested after an Aug. 3 raid at a compound in Taos County with 11 malnourished children be detained while awaiting trial on firearms-related charges.

A government prosecutor said that at least one of the children volunteered to an FBI agent that they were being trained for jihad.

Jany Leveille, 35, a Haitian national, is charged with unlawfully possessing firearms and ammunition as an alien living illegally in the United States.

The other four – Siraj Ibn Wahhaj, 40, Hujrah Wahhaj, 37, Subhanah Wahhaj, 35, and Lucas Morton, 40 – are charged with conspiring to provide the weaponry to Leveille.

According to court testimony, the group believed that Leveille was an “end-of-times prophet,” or “Maryam,” who was communicating directly with God. Leveille was said to have typed a 100-page book about the group’s journey across the country to New Mexico, which was referred to in testimony.

A second, hand-written book that officials say they found at the compound was titled “the phases of a terrorist attack.” The author wrote about how to do reconnaissance on a target and recommended doing a dry run before carrying out an attack.

Days after the compound was raided by Taos County sheriff’s deputies, the body of 3-year-old Abdul-Ghani Wahhaj was found in a tunnel on the compound. The boy was Siraj Ibn Wahhaj’s son and had been reported by his biological mother in Georgia as being kidnapped.

EXHIBIT B

Amy Sirignano, Morton's attorney, said that she and other defense attorneys plan to try to find third parties who could house the defendants when the case is litigated and then ask the district judge assigned to the case to reconsider the detention order.

Defense attorneys had asked that their clients be released to La Pasada halfway house in Albuquerque, but officials there had told the court they weren't comfortable taking any members of the group because of the publicity the case has received.

"This is just the first step in the case," Sirignano said. "We're going to keep trying to get our clients out."

Federal Magistrate Kirtan Khalsa told attorneys for at least some of the defendants that she may consider releasing them to a third party if one comes forward and is willing to board them while the case is litigated.

The group was arrested last month on suspicion of child abuse after the raid on the compound in Amalia, near the Colorado border.

The group was found with 11 children authorities said appeared malnourished. They were placed in the custody of the state Children, Youth and Families Department, where they remain.

Abdul-Ghani suffered from a seizure disorder, and his father and Leveille were charged with child abuse resulting in death for allegedly withholding medication from the boy. Instead, Siraj Ibn Wahhaj and possibly others in the group prayed and performed ruqyahs on the child every day for six to 12 hours. A ruqyah is the term used in the Islamic faith for an exorcism.

State charges were dismissed after the Taos District Attorney's Office missed court deadlines, and the FBI then arrested the group on the federal firearms charges.

Taos prosecutors say they plan to present the case to a grand jury later this month.

Zach Ives, Siraj Ibn Wahhaj's attorney, said his client hasn't received notice that he is the target of a grand jury.

Over the course of a federal detention hearing in Albuquerque on Wednesday that lasted more than five hours, FBI Special Agent Travis Taylor outlined the case against the group.

Much of his testimony was based on his reading of Leveille's book and interviews with her two teenage sons.

Taylor said after Abdul-Ghani Wahhaj was kidnapped from his mother in Georgia, he was taken to Alabama and the large group was loaded into a box trailer similar to a U-Haul trailer, which was driven to northern New Mexico.

In Amalia, they dug a large hole and drove a camper trailer into it. Lucas Morton and Subhanah Wahhaj, his wife, lived in the trailer with their children. The others stayed in the camper.

A 100-foot tunnel was dug at the site so the group could escape from law enforcement, and tires were stacked to surround and protect the compound, Taylor said.

The group also built a firing range to train in military-style tactics, he said.

Taylor said the group believed Leveille was receiving messages from God and translating them to the group. They believed Leveille was Mary, the mother of Jesus, and she would have been the dead child's mother, but his biological mother stole him from Leveille's womb using black magic, Taylor said.

Taylor said Leveille had told the group before Abdul-Ghani died that he was already dead and that they should exorcise the demons, or ginns, from his body. Then the child would be resurrected four months later as Jesus Christ. He would give them instructions on what institutions they should attack, Taylor said.

Taylor also said Siraj Ibn Wahhaj wanted to recruit an army to the compound and train them in jihad.

Assistant U.S. Attorney George Kraehe said at least one of the children found at the compound brought up on his own that they were being trained for jihad.

Defense attorneys had suggested that the testimony given by the children was unreliable since they were interviewed by FBI agents without a parent or guardian present.

"Witnesses described this as jihad ... completely on their own," Kraehe said. "Mr. Wahhaj trained his children to kill people."

Taylor said the children described being trained to fire weapons, reload while on the move, clear rooms and other military-style tactics. The children were only identified by initials, but they were all children of the five adults who are now in custody.

"The bulk of the testimony had very little to do with the indictment," Ives said during the hearing, asking that his client be released.

None of the members of the group is currently facing charges related to the child's alleged kidnapping or his death.

Taylor said Abdul-Ghani died during a ruqyah, which was performed on the 3-year-old every day for six to 12 hours. He said that, based on eyewitness interviews, authorities believe that Abdul-Ghani would cry and scream, foam at the mouth and his eyes would roll into the back of his head during the rituals.

It was unclear when the boy died, but Taylor said that, after his death, the group kept the body under a bed in the trailer.

When the corpse started to decay, Taylor said, some of the children washed the body every other day to try to prevent it from smelling.

Eventually, the body was moved into a tunnel.

It's unclear when the group arrived at the compound and when Abdul-Ghani died.

The three suspects named Wahhaj are siblings. Siraj Ibn Wahhaj and Leveille are a couple, and Morton is married to Subhanah Wahhaj, who is eight months pregnant.

Contact the writer.

College Football

Wilkins scores with 2 seconds left, Richmond tops St Francis

Manziel back at practice, wonders why he isn't playing

The Latest: Colgate donates team meals after game canceled

Charlotte edges Old Dominion 28-25 in Conference USA opener

LSU brings improved special teams to Auburn

••• MORE

HOME 

ADVERTISEMENT

Support local journalism

AlbuquerqueJournal